

The Ferguson Lie That Will Not Die

To this day, in protests across America, crowds will taunt policemen with the words, “Hands up, don’t shoot!” These words were allegedly uttered by my namesake, Michael Brown, before he was gunned down in Ferguson, Missouri by white police officer Darren Wilson in 2014.

The fact that witnesses attest that Brown never uttered such words is immaterial. The myth has been enshrined.

Brown’s death, which sparked weeks of rioting and helped spawn the Black Lives Matter movement, is something I am reminded of virtually every single day. And I mean that literally.

That’s because, a few years ago, a colleague of mine suggested that I sign up for Google Alerts, letting me know when my name was mentioned somewhere in the news.

Out of curiosity, but with full knowledge that there are many different Michael Browns in the news, I signed up for this free service. And for years now, virtually without break, there are at least four or five articles a day mentioning the death of Michael Brown.

He has been codified as a martyr. His name is mentioned side by side with Eric Garner and George Floyd and other Blacks who have died at the hands of the police. He died as the innocent victim of white police brutality. His last words were, “Hands up, don’t shoot!” The stories are always the same.

It doesn’t matter that local authorities did not find sufficient evidence to convict Officer Wilson of manslaughter, let alone murder.

It doesn’t matter that a lengthy, expensive investigation led

by President Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder also did not find evidence to convict Wilson. (Bear in mind that this investigation did find evidence of racism in the local police department. Yet it did not find evidence that Wilson used excessive force in his encounter with Brown.)

And it won't matter now that St. Louis County's top prosecutor, Prosecuting Attorney William Bell, himself Black, has not found sufficient evidence to convict Wilson after a five-month investigation.

The myth will live on. It has been codified.

In Bell's own words, "'My heart breaks' for Michael's parents. 'I know this is not the result they were looking for and that their pain will continue forever.'"

Yet it was the result of his investigation, just as it has been the result of every investigation conducted to date. There is no clear evidence to convict Wilson.

As explained by Larry Elder in a Prager U video, "Federal investigators from the Department of Justice found no credible evidence that Brown ever raised his hands in a "don't shoot" gesture—or in any way heeded the officer's commands for him to surrender.

"The federal report concluded that '... witnesses who originally stated Brown had his hands up in surrender recanted their original accounts, admitting that they did not witness the shooting or parts of it...'

"Investigators also concluded Brown never uttered the now iconic phrase.

"Again, from the report: 'The media has widely reported that there is witness testimony that Brown said "don't shoot" as he held his hands above his head. In fact, our investigation did not reveal any eyewitness who stated that Brown said, "Don't

shoot.”““

As stated on the United States Department of Justice website on March 4, 2015, “The Justice Department announced the findings of its two civil rights investigations related to Ferguson, Missouri, today. The Justice Department found that the Ferguson Police Department (FPD) engaged in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the First, Fourth and 14th Amendments of the Constitution. The Justice Department also announced that the evidence examined in its independent, federal investigation into the fatal shooting of Michael Brown does not support federal civil rights charges against Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson.”

If any report would have found evidence against Wilson, it was this one, and yet it did not. And now, another lengthy investigation has come to similar conclusions.

But what’s my purpose in bringing this up?

Well, truth does matter, doesn’t it? And there’s something wrong with building a movement on a lie (although, sadly, many a movement has been built on a lie).

Still, it’s only fair to ask if drawing attention to the mythological aspects of Brown’s death won’t diminish the real suffering of men like George Floyd.

Actually, in many cases, the reverse is true. There are people who have become hardened to the charge of police brutality because of the Ferguson lie. They are more inclined to dismiss the true and real because of the false and mythological. And without compelling video evidence, as in the case of George Floyd, they are prone to say, “Right. Just like Michael Brown. Just like ‘Hands up, don’t shoot.’ I don’t believe it.”

This is similar to the lie about Matthew Shepard, who has become the icon of anti-gay brutality. Some conservatives write off much of the narrative of gay suffering because

Shepard's brutal death was drug-related, not gay-related, even though laws have been enacted in his name. Plus, the false narrative distracts from the deeper issue of drugs and crime.

As stated by gay activist John Stoltenberg, "Keeping Matthew as the poster boy of gay-hate crime and ignoring the full tragedy of his story has been the agenda of many gay-movement leaders. Ignoring the tragedies of Matthew's life prior to his murder will do nothing to help other young men in our community who are sold for sex, ravaged by drugs and generally exploited. They will remain invisible and lost."

So, the myth about Shepard's tragic death distracts from the deeper tragedies that surrounded his life—and the lives of other young gay men.

Do I have hope that these lies will actually die? To sound a rare note of pessimism, no, I do not.

But now that yet another investigation does not find sufficient evidence to convict Darren Wilson, it's worth a try.

By rejecting the false narratives, we can focus on the truthful ones. And those do deserve our attention. {eoa}