

Trayvon Martin Case Not Emmett Till Revisited

As we mourn the death of **Trayvon Martin**, we should take the time to remember another 17-year-old black youth murdered just four years ago.

On March 2, 2008, high school senior Jamiel Shaw was gunned down in Los Angeles. According to police, Shaw was walking home when two men he had never met jumped out of a car and one shot him. A talented football player, Shaw had scholarship offers from Stanford University and Rutgers. The man who shot him was Petro Espinoza, an illegal immigrant and member of a gang with a history of extensive violence against African-Americans. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "Espinoza had been released from jail 28 hours before the shooting, after serving time for an earlier [violent] offense."

Why did the nation not mourn Jamiel the way we are mourning Trayvon? Was it because the media knew immediately that Shaw's killers were Latino, not white?

The slaying of **Trayvon Martin** opened a Pandora's box of emotions in the black community. Blacks of my generation remember all too well when one of our own could be lynched by whites, and law enforcement would look the other way. Those were terrible times in our nation's history, and Trayvon's death provoked many to assert that nothing had changed.

I am deeply sympathetic to the outrage felt by blacks over this tragedy, but I must point out that this is not our grandparents' world. Things have changed, as the most basic facts of this case reveal.

When this story broke, the media led us to believe that Trayvon had been hunted down like a dog by a skinhead white supremacist gun nut. In reality, Trayvon's killer, like 16.3

percent of the United States' population, is Latino. He is relatively light skinned, but hardly a wealthy child of white privilege and certainly not a member of a Latino gang known for violence against blacks, as Shaw's killer was. To the degree that race was involved in this crime, its involvement was undoubtedly complex—far too complex for reporters determined to fit the tragedy into their predetermined narrative.

For decades, both the media and politicians have tried to lump blacks and Latinos together, as if individuals from both groups automatically share common history and interests. Latinos are grouped with blacks far more often than with Asian-Americans, even though they often share the experience of immigration and learning English as a second language. Yet an honest look at the slayings of Martin and Shaw challenge the notion that blacks and Latinos are interchangeable minorities whose differences aren't worth noting or exploring.

Reality is far more complicated than most reporters or politicians care to contemplate. For example, several studies have shown that when immigration laws are enforced more strictly, black employment rises. The simple fact is that many Latino immigrants undercut black wages in lower-skilled jobs.

On the other hand, government quotas for minority-owned contracting have been shown to discriminate against Latino-owned businesses in favor of black-owned businesses. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce recently filed a complaint in Milwaukee alleging that they were being punished for their industry and success. This doesn't even begin to explore the competition for college admissions spots made more complex by racial quotas.

As a pastor, I am proud to have blacks and Latinos worshipping side by side in the churches that are part of my new network of churches (International Communion of Evangelical Churches). I have learned on the job that you cannot lump Puerto Ricans

in with Mexicans or Guatemalans any more than you can lump Nigerians in with Kenyans, or blacks from the Bronx in with blacks from South Carolina.

Race relations are complicated, far more complicated than the “whites oppressing blacks and others” narrative allows us to appreciate. There is no cheap policy fix for racial ignorance and hatred, and I’ve learned that the only way trust can be built between people of different backgrounds is through meaningful dialogue and relationships.

Although race relations in the United States have a long way to go, Juan Williams rightly pointed out in the *Wall Street Journal* that young black murder victims are far more likely to be killed by other blacks than by members of other races. He correctly calls the entertainment industry to task for perpetuating the stereotype of young black males as violent gangsters.

All of us can recognize that it is difficult for black crime victims to find justice, whoever their assailants, and still know that there is much work the black community needs to do on itself.

There are no easy answers in the **Trayvon Martin** case—this was not Emmett Till, Part II. The black community has a different set of challenges to face today than we did in the days of lynching, and we will only make progress if we can face them honestly.