In the face of the ugly violence against civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, broadcast nightly on the network news throughout the long hot summer of 1963, President John F. Kennedy gave an impassioned speech to the nation:

“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.”

Those words retain their profound impact in our times, in so many ways, but particularly in light of recent events in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland and other cities where unarmed black youth have been killed by white police officers — an event reportedly repeated at the rate of once every two days.

As staggering as that statistic is, more shocking is the almost total lack of accountability, either by criminal or civil litigation, or even internal disciplinary action.

It was just such indifference to the extinguishing of black lives that led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People more than 100 years ago.

Three years ago, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, returning from a convenience store to the townhouse of his father’s fiancée in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, was profiled, stalked and shot to death with 9 mm semiautomatic handgun by George Zimmerman, a “wannabe” cop who had organized a “neighborhood watch.”

Although Martin was unarmed and engaged in no wrongful conduct, it took the local authorities 42 days — and pressure from civil rights groups, marches and rallies around the country — to finally charge Zimmerman. He was “prosecuted,” sort of, and ultimately acquitted on July 13, 2013, setting off protests across the nation.

A review of the trial reveals a prosecution that, at best, was mishandled. The state itself put into evidence five of Zimmerman’s own self-serving, unchallenged and implausible versions of events, thus relieving Zimmerman of the need to take the stand, under oath, and be subjected to cross-examination.

In recordings, the jury heard Zimmerman tell police that Martin, with no history of violence, inexplicably jumped him, tried to smother him, repeatedly slammed his head onto the concrete sidewalk, screamed: “You got a f—ing problem, homie?” and “You’re gonna die tonight, MF,” and finally reached for Zimmerman’s gun (which was actually hidden in a back holster).

Notwithstanding the lack of any evidence to support this — the absence of Martin’s DNA on the gun or holster, the absence of Zimmerman’s DNA under Martin’s fingernails, the absence of injuries on Zimmerman consistent with such an attack, and finally Zimmerman’s substantial size advantage over the 158-pound teen — the jury of six women bought the self-defense and acquitted him of all charges.

Remarkably, the prosecutors sat back while their own police witnesses were allowed to testify in response to defense questions that they believed the story told by “George” (as they referred to the defendant).

Florida’s rule (universally recognized) forbids one witness from testifying to the credibility of another. The state even put Zimmerman’s best friend on the stand, who, having published a book crediting Zimmerman’s tale, not surprisingly supported his self-defense.

The prosecution team somehow also fumbled the compelling evidence that Martin was on his cellphone with a friend at the time he was stalked by Zimmerman, reporting to her nervously that a “crazy and creepy” man was following...
him. The call ended in Martin screaming: "Get off! Get off!"

In short, there was no real pursuit of the case against Zimmerman. Enter Eric Holder’s Department of Justice, charged with prosecuting civil rights offenders, which now concludes Zimmerman does not belong in that category.

Really? What about the evidence at trial that, when Zimmerman called 911 that fateful night, he described the African-American teen (presumably solely on the basis of his color) as "up to no good or he’s on drugs or something."

Referring to Martin in the context of previous burglaries and home invasions in the area allegedly committed by black males, Zimmerman complains to the 911 dispatcher, "These assholes. These f—ing punks. They always get away!"

Zimmerman then ignores the instruction not to follow the subject, instead chasing him, confronting him, and killing him with a single shot, point blank, to the heart.

Each of the three previous “suspicious person” 911 calls Zimmerman had made also identified black males.

How could the feds allow this blatant case of racial profiling and violence by a vigilante to go unpunished? Attorney General Holder talks a good game about race in America, but sadly does not walk the walk. MLW

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